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**Review of *Killing Custer: The Battle of the Little Big Horn and the Fate of the Plains Indians* By James Welch with Paul Stekler.**

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*Killing Custer: The Battle of the Little Big Horn and the Fate of the Plains Indians.* By James Welch with Paul Stekler. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994. Chronology, afterword, notes, index. 320 pp. \$25.00 cloth. \$13.95 paper.

*Killing Custer* began in 1990 as a film project, a collaboration between Paul Stekler (producer and director) and James Welch (noted Blackfeet/Gros Ventre author). Once the film was completed (it aired November of 1992), Welch embarked on his own historical and "impressionistic" reading of those events in Plains Indian history, armed with Paul Stekler's "research, maps, photographs, reading skill, and moral support." Being a collaborative text straddling history, fiction, political essay, and memoir, the book eludes easy categorization; nevertheless, it is engaging in multi-dimensional ways and from a myriad of perspectives.

Why *Killing Custer*? "Custer's Last Stand," as the event has mostly been known, has attracted the interest of all sorts of writers and media people over the years. The simple answer, implied in the title, is that the Custer craze needs to be put to rest once and for all, if American Indian perspectives are to emerge fully. The renaming of the battlefield Little Bighorn similarly shifts our attention.

Welch presents important facts as well as interesting details of the climate of the times. For example, in speaking of the 4 August 1873 encounter between Custer and the Seventh Cavalry and Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and their followers, he notes that "the fighting was close enough for Crazy Horse and Custer to look each other over, if they had known who the other was." Contrary to Custer legend, it was the Arikaras and Crows who knew Custer as "Son of the Morning Star," not Lakota people. "Crazy Horse's first look at Custer," Welch speculates, "was of a white man in his underwear and socks," since the attack caught him napping. Humor creeps in elsewhere, as when Welch puts words in a tourist's mouth: "Is that really Custer's jockstrap in there? Was he wearing it that fateful day?"

The ultimate value of the book, however, rests not so much with the details of history it presents, but with the author's weaving together of contemporary time, historical events before and after the battle, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, and Lakota Plains life leading up to and after 1876, as well as the turbulent AIM years of the 1970s. For me, its most touching part comes toward the end with Welch's depictions of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, men who maintained profound integrity and did so against overwhelming odds. In *Killing Custer*, Welch presents the facts with honesty, imagination, and empathy—visiting those times, places, and lives and seeing them as if for the first time.

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